

Book Review

Danny Kaplan

The Nation and the Promise of Friendship: Building Solidarity through Sociability

*Daniel Fridberg**

Palgrave Macmillan, 2018

ISBN: 978-3-319-78401-4 (hardcover)

ISBN: 978-3-319-78402-1 (eBook)

Sitting at home in lockdown - a reality presented by attempts to combat the Covid-19 virus – was accompanied by a new concept of solidarity: “Stay at home. Save lives”. That is, in order to take care of each other, people were required to act against their most fundamental instinct – coming together and relying on each other’s company. This requirement has put into a new perspective many important questions, with which social scientists have always been struggling. Some of the most relevant ones ask: ‘What makes a collection of individuals a society?’; and ‘How do individuals maintain social cohesion and solidarity?’. Although published two years prior to the pandemic’s outbreak, this book provides some unique and insightful perspectives on these issues.

Danny Kaplan is an associate professor at the Department of Sociology and Anthropology. He directs the Men Studies track at the Gender Studies programme and co-directs the Bar-Ilan Center for Cultural Sociology at Bar-Ilan University, Israel. Kaplan’s focus of interest has been for a long while, on what makes individuals come together to develop social solidarity, or in his words: ‘How to connect between social bonding at the micro-level and feelings of solidarity at the macro-level?’ (Kaplan, 2018: ix). And so, following a systematic ethnographic study, this book presents a theoretical framework as well as analyses of selected case studies in a pursuit to understand this paradox: ‘how do compatriots imagine the nation as a close-knit community of friends even as they know that it is, in reality, an abstract collectivity of strangers?’ (Kaplan, 2018: 1). Although this question may seem naïvely phrased, it fundamentally criticises and challenges the ethical foundation of nation-states - one of which Kaplan lives and works in - that is, that a nation is an organic-like collective, which shares culture, identity and a sense of joint purpose (Giddens, 1985; Smith, 2001). As Kaplan puts it in a paragraph later: ‘at the heart of the

* **Otago Polytechnic and University of Otago, (dfridberg1@gmail.com)**

national imagination lies a pervasive belief in the magic of transforming strangers into friends' (Kaplan, 2018: 1). Thus, as national ethos is not considered to be a strong enough platform for national bonding, the book explores the question above through the lens of 'Social Club Sociability'.

From the very wide range of disciplines and theories attempting to explain how and why political cooperation between citizens is generated or enabled, Kaplan chooses three frameworks as his theoretical points of departure, with which he either disagrees or attempts to build another level of understanding. These theoretical points of departure are the one made by Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities* (1991); Georg Simmel's (1950) micro-level perspective on relational theory; and Émile Durkheim's tradition analysing higher-level collective intimacy (Emirbayer, 2004). Each of these three theoretical frameworks provide, with their respective shortcomings or just waiting for another step to be made, a platform for launching the research Kaplan reports on in this book. This further step Kaplan attempts to make explores the concept of friendship as that social binding power which brings nations together through cultural codes of national life, collective public intimacy, and cultural symbols and rituals respectively.

The book is structured in three parts: theory, case studies and conclusion. The first part presents Kaplan's theoretical framework and argument for making sociability a key principle in understanding national solidarity. In it, through five chapters, Kaplan develops a three-layered model of national solidarity, by bringing Friendship back into the academic discourse, in the form of social clubs. In the first layer, Kaplan argues that modern life brings into existence a simultaneous multitude of social clubs for each member of society. On a national level, this creates a network nurturing standardised and easily relatable forms of communication, bonding together the nation's citizens. The second layer refers to research approached to public and collective intimacy. That is, what are the underlying concepts and frameworks which mediate between sociability and friendship and solidarity? Last, the third layer of Kaplan's framework explains the meta-narrative of strangers-turned-friends through interpreting national, or perhaps nationalist, rhetoric attributing kinship to compatriots' ties, elevating them from the level of friendship to the level of brotherhood, binding them in ties of unconditional loyalty, intimacy and familiarity.

The second part of the book examines three different cases of social clubs' sociability in Israel: Masonic lodges, The Big Brother TV reality show, and military service. This part of the book presents the insights from extensive research, conducted through semi-structured interviews and focus groups with participants and audiences, participatory observations, content analysis of TV programmes and discourse analysis of print media, websites and social media. Kaplan's findings support his initial argument and are quite thought provoking. Specifically, Kaplan has three main parts to the argument. According to the first one, dialectic components of brotherhood-friendship result in strong relations and intimacy created between individuals and within social clubs and collectives. The second part of the argument is that social bonds created on the micro-level represent, demonstrate and symbolise similar bonds fostered nationally. And finally, he argues that

behavioural norms and intersubjective meanings that are created by and maintained within social clubs, result in strong interpersonal bonds and friendships that exceed the boundaries of those social clubs within which they are first created.

In the third and concluding part of the book, Kaplan's presents his main argument: that people's sense of national attachment depends not only on the collective identity they seem to share with others but also on a longing that is cultivated ... through recurrent participation in shared, nationally bounding social institutions, best considered as social clubs. (Kaplan, 2018: 207).

In other words, while national identity has been emphasised in both theory and empirical research as the main mechanism which ties individuals to the national entity, their wish to create social bonds with one another provides a very strong vehicle, which should not be overlooked. Kaplan then continues to suggest a future research programme which continues his exploration of social clubs but broadens its scope to other sectors and wider parts of society within national boundaries, as well as broadens the disciplinary scopes to combine historical and ethnographically informed cultural analysis.

Kaplan's book is fascinating, has a broad perspective and can appeal to a multitude of readers: students and researchers of sociology, anthropology, social-psychology, political science, media studies and other social sciences and humanities, as well as lay readers who are looking for ways to better understand the rapidly changing political realities we all live in.

Three points of criticism, however, should be made here. First, Kaplan's mission in this book can be seen as structural functionalist. He refers to social clubs as serving a national binding and bonding of the citizens. This, of course is just one perspective and, at least in the case of Israeli society, can and should be questioned. As a wide range of research demonstrates, very often social clubs in Israel are confined to ethnic and sectorial boundaries rather than national ones, creating social competition rather than bonding. Thus, a critical, conflict-related prism applied to social clubs in Israel, might have provided very different understanding of the issue at hand.

Second, and following the first point, Kaplan's case studies are all situated in Israel, a very unique and eccentric (if I may say so) nation, which has a very strong national ethos, internalised by its Jewish majority, as well as overwhelming external threats, which, it can be argued, provide stronger incentives for social bonding than memberships in occasional social club. Furthermore, the representation in the chosen case studies of the wider Israeli society, which is strongly segregated in its daily life reality, is far from complete, as Kaplan himself mentions in his conclusion chapter. Thus, these case studies may be understood as representing Israeli social elite groups forming Old Boys Clubs rather than inclusive social clubs.

Finally, a point which Kaplan touches on but might require further discussion, is that the friendship discourse presented in the book seems arbitrarily limited by national boundaries. It's quite natural that in Israel's case, where political borders and social

boundaries strongly correlate, friendships across borders are very rare and unlikely, at least among its Jewish majority. However, in other countries and nations, the containment of friendships within national boundaries is at least not trivial and often cross-borders social relations can be as strong as intra-borders ones. Thus, it seems that instead of celebrating friendship and social clubs as the potential driver to a more inclusive, tolerant and peaceful world, its normative function in this instance is potentially one of national separation and exclusivity.

Still, the contribution Kaplan makes to research on friendship is significant and thought provoking and if anything, while perhaps not bringing the entire story, his invitation to expand his research is very timely and important.

Although we have no way of predicting how post Covid-19 states and societies may change how they deal with challenges and crises - and there is no shortage of those queuing up round the corner - the importance of friendship as means for social solidarity and cohesion - and therefore resilience - cannot be overemphasised. In an era, when right-wing political leaders across the world turn their citizens against each other, friendship seems ever more important as the right direction both nations separately and humanity as a whole should move in, if we are to stand a chance in dealing with the challenges awaiting.

About the reviewer:

Daniel Fridberg is a principal lecturer at Otago Polytechnic and a research affiliate at the National Centre for Peace and Conflict Studies, University of Otago. His PhD research has focused on processes of transformation which Israeli selective conscientious objectors undergo in their path from being combat soldiers to refusing taking part in military operations in the Occupied Palestinian Territories. Daniel had previously taught at the Evens Program in Conflict Resolution and Mediation in Tel-Aviv University.

References

Anderson, B. 1991. *Imagined Communities*, revised edition. London; New York: Verso.

Giddens, A. 1985. *Nation-state and Violence*. Polity Press.

Emirbayer, M. 2004. Introduction—Emile Durkheim: Sociologist of Modernity. *Emile Durkheim: Sociologist of Modernity*, pp.1-28.

Simmel, G. 1950. *The Sociology of Georg Simmel* (Vol. 92892). Simon and Schuster.

Smith, Anthony D. 2001. *Nationalism: Theory, Ideology, History*. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press.